

An in-depth study on e-books

Reading and literature, public libraries and the public lending right system, and the situation of publishers and authors, are some of the issues dealt with by the Committee on Cultural Affairs of the Swedish Parliament. E-books touch many of these areas. It is therefore important for the Committee to have a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of developments relating to e-books. A committee follow-up and evaluation group, with representatives from all parliamentary parties, therefore decided to carry out a study of electronic books from a broad perspective.

E-books are books, as well as something else. They are both obvious and complicated and they can be considered to have both advantages and disadvantages. This duality makes them an important object of study. And the more we know about e-books, the less we will come to associate them with misunderstanding, disappointment and conflict.

The purpose of the study was to describe and analyse the e-book and put it in a larger context. The focus is on issues of relevance to policy. The study reflects the key players and current topics and provides an international outlook. In addition, it includes an overview of the supply, market and consumption of e-books, and not only of the commercial market, but also non-commercial supply. It also describes, in brief, the laws and regulations relating to e-books. Three areas of specialisation are discussed in particular: e-book reading, privacy issues and the question of public library lending. The study is based on research, statistics, reports, articles and interviews.

E-books raise hopes and fears

During the last one or two years, there has been an increase in the publication, sales and lending of e-books in Sweden. The total share is still small, however, in relation to printed books. E-book development has been slower than expected, but their entry into the market has nevertheless had a fundamental impact on writers, publishers, distributors and libraries. One example is that some hardware vendors are beginning to act as publishers. Another example is writers who publish themselves directly

and skip all other steps of the publishing process. Some authors wonder if they will get paid for their books, or if they must survive on income from different kinds of events. Public libraries have fought for their right to offer e-books to users, at the same time as they face a new situation with publishers “lending” e-books, albeit for a fee. Illegal downloading is a major problem for copyright holders.

The study shows that e-books are considered to have obvious advantages. You can store your personal library in an e-reader, and you can get instant access to the book you want to read. The new technology is promising for people with reading disabilities. At the same time, e-books are considered to have significant downsides. There is a concern that reading will become fragmentary if you are connected to the Internet while reading. Similarly, there are concerns that most e-books will be in English, and not so many in Swedish. Many people say it is difficult to download e-books, and that e-reading is uncomfortable for the eyes. A common opinion is that reading a printed book gives you “a better feeling”.

E-books are here to stay, but they will not replace the printed book. Printed books and e-books will answer different needs. Within a fairly near future, e-books will probably develop into something else than digitised versions of printed books. A development towards e-books with animations, sound effects and links has started abroad, for example in the USA and UK.

The readers of e-books

E-books have not attracted any new groups of readers so far. It is primarily established readers who choose the e-format, and those who read e-books are most likely to read printed books too.

Many e-book readers are young. Persons with access to e-readers or tablets are also frequent e-book readers, as well as users of public library online services. There are about as many women and men reading e-books. Hence, there is a difference compared to printed books, where the proportion of female readers is considerably larger.

E-books and privacy

E-books raise questions about the relationship between the reader and the distributor. Regardless of whether you buy or borrow the book at the library, you must register to be able to read an e-book. Details of searches and downloads can be traced. Some services, for example streaming e-books or writing comments, allow distributors to “look into” the reading and data can be saved. Publishers are, of course, not saving information because they are “curious”, but to be able to develop and offer services to the users. But there is a risk that the information may fall into the wrong hands. There are also examples from other countries of data on e-book selections and e-reading being combined with other information about the individual.

This is seen by some as a serious threat to the freedom of information. They argue that it is a fundamental right to seek information and read books. In their opinion, it should not be possible to trace information and use data for commercial or other purposes. Others argue that it is part of our Internet culture and e-society – we leave information about ourselves on the Internet all the time.

Privacy issues in relation to e-books have not been widely discussed, but they are likely to draw more attention in the future.

The question of public library lending

E-books are not included in the public lending right system. Publishers and public libraries must agree on the conditions for library lending. In Sweden, this has not been an easy process. If the parties do not agree, there will be no e-book lending at the public libraries, since it is not compulsory for publishers to sell their e-books to libraries.

Earlier, attempts were made to find a single model of agreement. Now the situation is characterised by a greater degree of flexibility. Individual publishers and libraries negotiate with each other, and different kinds of agreements are expected. The Swedish Authority of Local Authorities and Regions will represent the public libraries in the negotiations, but they

will not be able to sign the contracts. This must be done by the libraries themselves.

The contract model that has dominated so far will probably be replaced by more flexible solutions. Libraries will probably purchase e-books title by title, which make it possible for them to build their own collections. The libraries will be able to buy new books, but more popular titles will be more expensive than older or less popular ones. If the library wants to lend the book to more than one user at the same time, it will have to buy more copies.

Today's focus on the most popular books – both for sale and for lending – will probably be replaced by a broader view on e-books. Different institutions and authorities are planning measures to make a wider range of e-literature more accessible.

United States in the lead, Nordic countries slower

E-reading is most prevalent in the United States. One explanation is that the publisher Amazon has made strategic efforts to increase e-book reading, for example by lowering prices and binding readers by contract to their own e-reader. It is possible to borrow e-books at a majority of American libraries, and the number of library e-book loans is growing, albeit from a low level. In Europe, you find most e-book readers in the UK. In the rest of Europe, e-books represent a much lower share of total issues, sales and reading.

The situation in Norway, Denmark and Finland is similar to the one in Sweden. The publication of titles in the native language has, so far, been limited. Just as in Sweden, it has been difficult for publishers and libraries to agree, and the development of payment models appears to be moving in the same direction as in Sweden. Also, public efforts are being made to make e-literature available outside the commercial market, albeit to varying degree in the different countries.

A book is a book is a book?

In many ways it is correct to say that “a book is a book is a book”, regardless of whether it is an e-book or a printed book. The content is often exactly the same in e-books and paper books, and an e-book is often designed to look like a printed book. On the other hand, the e-book is defined as a service in copyright law, which has major implications for taxation and lending at libraries, for example. It is important to note and discuss the differences between the printed book and the e-book. Otherwise e-books might be perceived as something different from what they are, which further increases the risk of misunderstanding and conflict.

Technological developments have led to a situation where earlier concepts and rules are not as easy to apply anymore. One day it will be possible to define the difference between a print book, an e-book and other digital content. That day, we will have the answer to many of the other questions that arise in relation to e-books, too.

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